



# Christian

The Couture Years, 1942-52



## Early Years

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hat is genius without opportunity?

*Does the development of an extraordinary talent depend as much on happenstance as intent? It can be argued that a genius is a person of exceptional abilities who has the good fortune to live at a time when the maturation of his or her unique qualities is fully appreciated and encouraged. Gilbert Adrian was just such a person.*

*Adrian was often referred to as "the dramatist of American fashion." The nearly twenty years he spent designing theater and film costumes provided the foundation upon which he built his couture line. The result was a distinctive fashion sensibility, which he expressed through his dramatic and elegant design and tailoring.*

*Adrian was the champion of the American Woman. He believed she was unique in spirit, style, and form. It was for her that he designed some of the most creative clothing of the 1940s. In return for his devotion, America's female population turned him into a fashion icon.*

*Adrian was never fully accepted by the Francocentric world of New York City's Seventh Avenue, the traditional hub of the American fashion business. As much as the editors of influential magazines like Vogue and Harper's Bazaar wanted to ignore him, Adrian's remarkable instincts, savvy, and style made that impossible.*

Born Adrian Adolph Greenburg in 1903, Adrian spent his first eighteen years in Naugatuck, Connecticut. His mother was an artist, and his father ran the family millinery business. Drawing and painting came easily to Adrian as a boy. Encouraged by his uncle, a theatrical designer, he exercised his precocious abilities working nearby in summer stock. In 1921 he was accepted into Parsons School of Fine and Applied Arts in New York City. Shortly before matriculating in 1921, he adopted his professional name on the advice of a friend in the theater and much to his father's chagrin.

Adrian found the environment of art school stifling. By mid-year the faculty decided he would have greater success at Parson's Paris branch. There, a few months after his arrival, he was "discovered" by composer and theatrical impresario Irving Berlin, who hired Adrian to design costumes for one of his Music Box Revues on Broadway. Adrian returned to New York, and there in 1922 and 1923 he designed theatrical costumes. His sketches caught the attention of Natacha Rambova, who offered him the opportunity to design costumes for her husband, Rudolph Valentino's (unrealized) film *The Hooded Falcon*. Thus at age twenty-one Adrian was off to Hollywood and a career in movies.

## Hollywood

The year was 1924. The motion picture industry was still young; the great studios were just beginning to form. The youthful, talented Adrian quickly made a name for himself, and within a few years he was head costume designer at Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer, one of the industry's most powerful studios. *Camille* (1936), *Marie Antoinette* (1938), *The Wizard of Oz* (1939), and *Pride and Prejudice* (1940) are just four of the exquisitely designed films that won Adrian his place of distinction in Hollywood history. His superb dramatic sense gave his motion picture costumes their unmistakable style. He was known for his careful research, expensive fabrics, and striking details. The heroine may have been the girl-next-door or a blonde "bombshell," an eighteenth-century queen of France or a nineteenth-century courtesan, but the clothes were always appropriate, feminine, and romantic with layers of soft fabrics, form-fitting shapes, or ruffles and lace.



## The Couture Years

Adrian was strongly advised against following through with his business plans. Paris was occupied by the Germans, and there was an air of uncertainty about the escalation of war. His concerned associates warned that his venture might not flourish and, indeed, could lead to financial ruin. Nevertheless his decision to shift to commercial fashion design was not without justification. Throughout the thirties Adrian had given advice to his admiring public on the radio and in print, and copies of his most popular contemporary film costumes had been successfully marketed. So, in the fall of 1941, in association with his longtime friend, Woody Fiert, who had been the senior buyer for the women's department at Bullocks Wilshire, he prepared his first collection and presented it in January 1942, just one month after the bombing of Pearl Harbor, in the garden of his home.

In the fall of 1942 Adrian opened his elegant couture salon, Adrian, Ltd., on Beverly Drive near the corner of Wilshire Boulevard in Beverly Hills. For the next ten years he would provide American women with the touch of the glamour that he had so masterfully provided the Hollywood elite.

Adrian believed that there was an emergent American style, influenced by Hollywood and reflected not only in costume design but in the strong and independent characters portrayed by the most popular female stars. With the country at war and nationalism running high, there could not have been a more propitious time for Adrian to proclaim his philosophy. In interviews he stated his belief that the women of the United States were different from their European counterparts; their vigorous individualism would be a vital force in the changing world. In his couture line his ideas were expressed by his trim, broad-shouldered suits, his use ofingham—which he considered the most American of fabrics—and the boldness of his designs.

Drama, guided by good taste and quality, was at the core of his aesthetic. He discouraged his customer from trying to emulate the look of the Hollywood stars. Instead, he advised her to strive to define a look of her own. He once said, "A good dress has to be becoming, useful and beautiful. Too many people associate utility with drabness. A good dress has a sense of classical rightness that makes it wearable until it falls apart."<sup>1</sup>

1. *New York Times Magazine*, 27 May 1945, 13

The 1920s and 1930s were decades of radical social change. The scope of this change is no more clearly expressed than in women's clothing. By the early twenties women for the most part had thrown away the corsets that had been restricting them for centuries, exposed the full length of their lower legs for the first time, and bobbed their hair. By the thirties they were wearing trousers and shorts for sport and informal occasions without being considered scandalous. The women of the United States and Europe were hungry for this change, and they turned to the movies to tell them of the latest styles.

Paying close attention to trends in fashionable dress, Adrian's impeccable instincts led him to take the most daring elements—details of shape, cut, line—and translate them into the larger-than-life images seen on the big screen. Outrageous hats, frilly sleeves, and most importantly padded shoulders had made transitory appearances on the Paris runways. It was Adrian, arguably the most influential trendsetter of his era, who through the medium of film, popularized these looks, making them standards of fashionable dress, despite the predictions of the forecasters. Paris could advertise its designs with models and magazines, but Adrian had the movies and its goddesses.

By 1941 Europe was at war, and the glamorous days of Hollywood had begun to wane. The extravaganzas that had given Adrian his greatest artistic opportunities seemed trivial in the face of German expansionism. With an acute understanding of what Hollywood's move away from extravagance would mean for him, Adrian decided to leave MGM and turn his attention to the world of fashionable dress.





**A**drian's imagination was stirred by a variety of interests, his love of art and animals, his knowledge of history, his travels through Africa and Europe. The effect of each of these is manifest in his work. One of the most powerful influences on his fashion designs came nevertheless in the form of a government regulation officially titled General Limitation Order L-85.

With the outbreak of World War II the United States government restricted the use of many materials and consumer goods in order to maintain supplies for both military and civilian use. The War Production Board established regulations governing the use and manufacture of numerous products including textiles and clothing. L-85, which went in effect in 1942, essentially froze the fashionable silhouette. Inserted into the elegant programs from Adrian's first fall fashion show was a card outlining the newly imposed limitations:

*We feel privileged at this vital time in our world's history to present a collection of clothes carefully attuned to Government Order L-85. Here, briefly, are the highlights of this Government ruling: No bias or dolman sleeves. No woolen evening wraps. No woolen evening dresses. A maximum of 144-inch sweep [hemline] for evening dresses. No suit jacket over 25 inches long. No cuffs on suits. No patch pockets. No belt over two inches wide. No overskirts.*

Stanley Marcus, of the Dallas department store Neiman Marcus, headed the committee that wrote the regulations. He later said that their goal was to effectively prevent any extreme style changes "which might have encouraged women to discard their existing clothing."

Catering to the higher end of the fashion market, Adrian had to meet the discriminating tastes of his well-heeled clientele. He met the challenge of L-85

and the discerning needs of his customers by substituting the use of luxurious and exotic materials that were restricted or otherwise in short supply with designs for suits and evening dresses that were clearly some of the most labor-intensive of their day. Fabric insets, intricate seaming, and a play of pattern and color were the distinctive details that were carried through Adrian's designs.

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ignificant to Adrian's success was his ability to surround himself with other artists and craftspeople whose efforts enhanced his own. Working with his knowledgeable design assistant, Chris Ghiatis, and his head draper and pattern maker, Hanna Lindfors, his designs were first translated into muslin mock-ups; elaborate drapes or the placement of complicated piecing could only be realized once a pattern became three-dimensional. Final details were refined on the live mannequin before a sample was actually constructed in the studio.

Adrian also worked closely with several fabric manufacturers and designers, notably Bianchini-Férier, a French firm known for its beautiful silks, and Pola Stout, a New York textile designer who specialized in striped woollens. Together with Bianchini, Adrian developed his innovative signature fabrics with woven designs that look hand-painted. Ghiatis worked closely with Stout to refine both fabric and suit designs. For example, they would lay out a jacket pattern on a sample of her woollens and determine the exact spacing of the stripe in order for it to achieve the effect Adrian desired.

Each semiannual collection presented between 150 and 200 suits and dresses. First choice went to the ready-to-wear market, sold under the name of Adrian, Inc., at fashionable department stores such as Robinsons (Los Angeles), Marshall Field (Chicago), and Neiman Marcus (Dallas), each with an exclusive local franchise. Their buyers and others attended the evening fashion shows (Adrian's were the first to be presented as black-tie affairs). Designs not chosen by buyers for ready-to-wear remained in the couture line and were shown to the exclusive couture clients two nights later. Once a client ordered a dress, it would be custom made and fit to her in the workrooms of the Beverly Hills salon with an Adrian, Ltd., label.

Each new Adrian collection was widely reviewed by fashion journalists except for the die-hard Paris loyalists. Adrian insisted that American taste and fashion instincts were as viable as any from Europe. He was vocal in his support of other American fashion designers, insisting that the unique American style, which was less formal than Europe's, deserved full recognition. In 1945 he was awarded Coty's American Fashion Critics Award, the Winnie, for outstanding achievement.

## The Postwar Years

Although Adrian refused to adhere to the fashion dictates of Paris, he did take full advantage of the lifting of wartime restrictions and the shift to postwar optimism. Throughout his career a feminine look had been one of his trademarks. This is clearly seen in his later collections, which incorporate the same romantic splendor that existed in his most beautiful designs for the movies. His sense of whimsy, somewhat suppressed during the years of the war, could now be more freely expressed as seen, for example, in his Barnyard Series of long, at-home, or informal dinner dresses depicting farm animals.

Paris meanwhile was regaining its hold on the fashion world, and there was a renewed emphasis on the unrestricted consumption of manufactured goods, such as textiles. That year the French designer Christian Dior introduced his "New Look." Softer, rounder, and generally more confining, this new style was defined by longer, fuller skirts, tighter bodices, and unpadded shoulders.

By 1947 many women had left their wartime jobs. Adrian insisted that the American woman would not give up the hard-won freedoms acquired during the war. He believed that she was a woman of grace and speed and that Dior's new silhouette did not recognize

*The most ridiculous error we can make is to believe that any one spot on the map must alone influence our taste. We in America are rich in ideas. We are the synthesis of all the people of the world. From the traditions of all countries mingled in our blood we will build a new era of creativeness in the postwar world.*

Interview in *McCall's Magazine* April, 1945

her independence. As correct as the reading of his public had been five years earlier, it was incorrect now. In only a few seasons it became apparent that, no matter how much Adrian did not want to follow the Parisian lead, American women did.

Adrian, Ltd., closed its doors in 1952. The stress of the business had taken its toll on the forty-nine-year-old designer. He suffered a heart attack and on the advice of his doctors opted for an extended rest. He and his wife, Janet Gaynor, moved to their plantation in Brazil; only after several years of retirement did the couple return to live in Hollywood. While working on a stage version of *Camelot*, Adrian suffered a second attack. He died September 13, 1959.

Adrian was truly a man of his time. The development of technology in Hollywood and the changing social climate here and abroad provided the perfect environment for the full flowering of his genius. It was his singular vision, however, that guided him through what can only be considered one of the outstanding careers in both Hollywood and fashion history.

Text prepared by Cara Varnell, associate conservator, textiles, and Kaye Spilker, assistant curator, costumes and textiles, Los Angeles County Museum of Art.



## Gowns by Adrian

From the late 1920s until 1941 Gilbert Adrian was the head costume designer at MGM, where his innovative contemporary fashions and interpretations of period dress, worn by such stars as Joan Crawford, Greta Garbo, Jean Harlow, and Norma Shearer, contributed to the overall glamorous appearance of their films as well as to the indelible impression they made as stars. In conjunction with its exhibition of gowns from Adrian's subsequent years as a couturier, the museum's film department presents a two-month series of Adrian films on Friday nights. The series is supplemented by Adrian film matinees on Wednesdays, a total of twenty-four Adrian titles in all.

Turner Entertainment Co. generously provided the films for this program.

WEDNESDAY, SEPTEMBER 6, 1 P.M.

*Mata Hari* (1931/92 minutes) pr: B.P. Fineman; dir: George Fitzmaurice; scr: Benjamin Glazer and others; w/Greta Garbo, Ramon Novarro, Lionel Barrymore.

FRIDAY, SEPTEMBER 8, 1 & 8 P.M.

*The Women* (1939/132 minutes) pr: Hunt Stromberg; dir: George Cukor; scr: Anita Loos, Jane Murn from the play by Clare Boothe; w/Norma Shearer, Joan Crawford, Rosalind Russell.

*Dynamite* (1929/129 minutes) pr/dir: Cecil B. de Mille; scr: Jeanie Macpherson; w/Kay Johnson, Charles Bickford, Conrad Nagel.

WEDNESDAY, SEPTEMBER 13, 1 P.M.

*A Free Soul* (1931/91 minutes) exec. pr: Irving Thalberg; dir: Clarence Brown; scr: John Meehan; w/Lionel Barrymore, Norma Shearer, Leslie Howard.

FRIDAY, SEPTEMBER 15, 1 & 8 P.M.

*Camille* (1937/108 minutes) pr: Irving Thalberg, Bernard Hymn; dir: George Cukor; scr: Frances Marion and others; w/Greta Garbo, Robert Taylor, Lionel Barrymore.

*Queen Christina* (1933/101 minutes) pr: Walter Wanger; dir: Rouben Mamoulian; scr: Salka Viertel and others; w/Greta Garbo, John Gilbert.



WEDNESDAY, SEPTEMBER 20, 1 P.M.

*Dinner at Eight* (1933/113 minutes) pr: David O. Selznick; dir: George Cukor; scr: Frances Marion, Herman J. Mankiewicz; w/Marie Dressler, John Barrymore, Lionel Barrymore, Jean Harlow, Billie Burke.

FRIDAY, SEPTEMBER 22, 1 & 8 P.M.

*Hollywood: Style Center of the World* (1937/10 minutes) Adrian appears in this newsreel designing a gown for *Susan and God*. *Susan and God* (1940/117 minutes) pr: Hunt Stromberg; dir: George Cukor; scr: Anita Loos; w/Joan Crawford, Fredric March, Ruth Hussey, Rita Hayworth. *When Ladies Meet* (1941/108 minutes) pr: Robert Z. Leonard, Orville O. Dull; dir: Leonard; scr: S. K. Lauren, Anita Loos; w/Joan Crawford, Robert Taylor, Greer Garson, Herbert Marshall.

Boleslawski;  
Robert Mont

WEDNESDAY  
*Woman of the*  
Mankiewicz;  
Michael Kani

FRIDAY, OCT  
*Pride and Prej*  
dir: Robert Z  
w/Laurence  
*Anna Karenin*  
dir: Clarence  
Fredric Marc

WEDNESDAY, SEPTEMBER 27, 1 P.M.

*The Mask of Fu Manchu* (1932/70 minutes)  
dir: Charles Brabin, Charles Vidor; scr: John Willard and others; w/Boris Karloff, Myrna Loy, Lewis Stone, Karen Morley.

FRIDAY, SEPTEMBER 29, 1 & 8 P.M.

*China Seas* (1935/89 minutes) pr: Albert Lewin; dir: Tay Garnett; scr: Jules Furthman, James Kevin McGuinness; w/Clark Gable, Jean Harlow, Wallace Beery, Rosalind Russell.

*Madame Satan* (1930/105 minutes) pr/dir: Cecil B. de Mille; scr: Jeanie Macpherson; w/Kay Johnson, Reginald Denny, Lillian Roth.

WEDNESDAY, OCTOBER 4, 1 P.M.

*Grand Hotel* (1932/115 minutes) pr: Irving Thalberg; dir: Edmund Goulding; scr: William A. Drake; w/Greta Garbo, John Barrymore, Lionel Barrymore, Joan Crawford.

FRIDAY, OCTOBER 6, 1 & 8 P.M.

*Sweethearts* (1938/120 minutes) pr: Hunt Stromberg; dir: W. S. Van Dyke; scr: Dorothy Parker, Alan Campbell; w/Jeanette MacDonald, Nelson Eddy, Frank Morgan.

*The Last of Mrs. Cheyney* (1937/98 minutes)  
pr: Lawrence Weingarten; dir: Richard

Boleslawski; scr: Leon Gordon and others; w/Joan Crawford, Robert Montgomery, William Powell.

WEDNESDAY, OCTOBER 11, 1 P.M.

*Woman of the Year* (1942/114 minutes) pr: Joseph L. Mankiewicz; dir: George Stevens; scr: Ring Lardner Jr., Michael Kanin; w/Spencer Tracy, Katharine Hepburn.

FRIDAY, OCTOBER 13, 1 & 8 P.M.

*Pride and Prejudice* (1940/116 minutes) pr: Hunt Stromberg; dir: Robert Z. Léonard; scr: Aldous Huxley, Jane Murfin; w/Laurence Olivier, Greer Garson.

*Anna Karenina* (1935/95 minutes) pr: David O. Selznick; dir: Clarence Brown; scr: Clemence Dane; w/Greta Garbo, Fredric March, Basil Rathbone.

WEDNESDAY, OCTOBER 18, 1 P.M.

*Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* (1941/122 minutes) pr: Victor Saville, Victor Fleming; dir: Fleming; scr: John Lee Mahin; w/Spencer Tracy, Ingrid Bergman, Lana Turner.

FRIDAY, OCTOBER 20, 1 & 8 P.M.

*Ziegfeld Girl* (1941/131 minutes) pr: Pandro S. Berman; dir: Robert Z. Léonard; scr: Marguerite Roberts, Sonya Levien; w/James Stewart, Judy Garland, Hedy Lamarr, Lana Turner.  
*Dramatic School* (1938/80 minutes) pr: Mervyn Le Roy; dir: Robert B. Sinclair; scr: Ernst Vajda, Mary C. McCall, Jr.; w/Luise Rainer, Paulette Goddard, Gale Sondergaard.

WEDNESDAY, OCTOBER 25, 1 P.M.

*Red Dust* (1932/86 minutes) pr: Hunt Stromberg; dir: Victor Fleming; scr: John Lee Mahin; w/Clark Gable, Jean Harlow, Mary Astor.

FRIDAY, OCTOBER 27, 1 & 8 P.M.

*Bitter Sweet* (1940/94 minutes) pr: Victor Saville; dir: W. S. Van Dyke II; scr: Lesser Samuels from the play by Noel Coward; w/Jeanette MacDonald, Nelson Eddy, George Sanders.

*Lovely to Look At* (1952/102 minutes) pr: Jack Cummings; dir: Mervyn Le Roy; scr: George Wells, Harry Ruby; w/Howard Keel, Kathryn Grayson, Ann Miller, Red Skelton, Zsa Zsa Gabor.

Programmed by Cara Varnell, Kaye Spilker and Mitch Tuchman.



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